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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000202

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: CYCLONE SIDR: THE TIME TO REBUILD IS NOW
(CORRECTED)

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The transition from emergency relief to reconstruction assistance is going poorly three months after Cyclone Sidr tore through southern Bangladesh. While the Caretaker Government and its local and international partners deserve strong marks for providing the food, clothing and potable water urgently needed in the storm's immediate aftermath, not enough is being done to provide the shelter and livelihoods that are now so desperately needed. With the rainy season fast approaching and harvests still looming far in the distance, the next phase of Sidr recovery needs to gather steam fast. It is time to rebuild homes, make credit available and create jobs to fix the region's fractured infrastructure. Otherwise, the initial successful response to the disaster could all be for naught. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) A USG interagency team of Department of State, Department of Defense and U.S. Agency for International Development personnel visited Patuakhali and Barguna districts in southern Bangladesh in early February to assess cyclone reconstruction needs. (NOTE: The findings of a second interagency team that canvassed southwestern Bangladesh will be reported SEPTEL. END NOTE) The team found that much has gone well since Sidr upended the region on November 15. Although most crops were destroyed, people are receiving food through ongoing emergency relief. Although many schools were damaged, classes are in session and are filled with children. Although much livestock was killed, fields and villages teem with cattle, goats and poultry. Towns bustle with commerce. There are no overt signs of unrest. Villagers say relief distribution has generally been fair and has not been marked by significant graft.

¶3. (SBU) Yet all is far from well. Village upon village visited by the team are scarred by heavily damaged houses and bare mud foundations where once stood homes blown apart or washed away in Sidr's fury. The government has distributed 5,000 taka (approximately USD 71) to families who lost their homes and 2,000 taka (approximately USD 29) to families whose homes were partially damaged; the near universal complaint is that these sums are not nearly enough to rebuild. As a result, many villagers are living in hovels, pieced together

with blue polyurethane, tin sheets and pieces of wood; often, the roofs have gaping holes through which rain will pour once the wet season starts in a few months.

14. (SBU) Credit is not flowing to the fishermen and small shopkeepers whose livelihoods were torn asunder by Sidr. The main commercial street in Bogirhat town in Barguna district is lined with shuttered stores that were destroyed or damaged by Sidr. Typically, such businesses would seek a loan from one of the large domestic non-governmental organizations that have played a central role in Bangladesh's development. Yet Shumon Kumarshil, a local official with BRAC, a major NGO, said his group had provided credit to only two Bogirhat entrepreneurs since the cyclone -- 80,000 taka (USD 1,142) to a pharmacist and 150,000 taka (USD 2,143) to a rice trader. The NGO charged 12.5% interest over the 10-month life of the loan, more stringent terms than were offered before the cyclone. "The monthly installment is high," acknowledged Shumon. "Most people can't afford it." The number of smaller, micro-credit loans from BRAC is way down since Sidr, according to local BRAC officials, in part because people who lost everything in the storm are not able to pay off their earlier borrowings.

15. (SBU) BRAC plans a separate loan program for the fishermen who lost their boats and nets, but a visit to the nearby fishing village of Moupara found its main industry nearly dead in the water. One fisherman, Mohammad Sorhab Hossain, wearing a tattered T-shirt bearing the words "nautical crew," lost his boat and nets in the storm; his family of nine people is trying to manage on the 50 taka (about 70 cents) he ekes out each day using previously retired, worn nets and a rickety boat he bought for 500 taka (USD 7). His family is down to two meagre meals a day, primarily dahl (lentils) and

DHAKA 00000202 002 OF 002

vegetables he can scavage from the village.

16. (SBU) The dirt road to Moupara is in awful repair, damaged from the raging tide that overflowed the banks of the adjacent Payra River during the cyclone. Infrastructure -- be it roads, embankments, tube wells, sluice gates, or public buildings -- is hurting all over the region but there are few work-for-food or work-for-money programs for villagers to join. In Moupara, BRAC paid 40 women 100 taka (approximately USD 1.50) a day for a month to help rebuild roads, but that program has ended. While local officials throughout the region complain that the inflow of aid has made villagers lazy, it is just as much the lack of work that is keeping them idle -- the team did not see one group working on infrastructure as it traveled extensively through Patuakhali and Barguna districts in the first week of February. Indeed, Moupara headman Shahad Talukder said perhaps as many as one-fifth of village families had gone to Chittagong and Dhaka in search of work as rickshaw cyclists or in ready-made garment factories. A few days later the team met three women in Mithaganj union of Patuakhali district whose husbands left for Dhaka to work as day laborers loading ships. Shirin, a 26-year-old mother of two small daughters, said her husband was earning 150 taka (approximately USD 2.20) a day, slightly more than he made in Mithaganj as a fieldhand. She said he left for Dhaka two months earlier and planned to return in two weeks to check on local job prospects.

17. (SBU) Local officials say the current government food assistance for particularly vulnerable people is 15 kilograms of rice per family each month for four months -- in many of the areas the team visited the second distribution had just been made. Yet the earliest harvest in villages that can plant two rice crops yearly is August; other villages that plant one rice crop annually will have to wait until the end of the year. Extended food aid certainly will be necessary, but so too will programs that restore livelihoods and create work programs to ensure everyone has enough to eat. Also important for successful reconstruction will be greater coordination between the government and various aid givers.

We heard, for example, that some villagers were using their government grants to rebuild homes for other purposes in hopes of receiving a greater sum of money for home reconstruction from other donors, such as Saudi Arabia.

18. (C) COMMENT: The rush of emergency aid into southern Bangladesh in the immediate aftermath of Sidr stabilized the stricken region. Three months on, however, the loss of livelihood, shelter and other infrastructure remains largely unaddressed. The USG comprehensive plan for Sidr relief envisioned from the start a major reconstruction component to follow the initial phase of emergency aid. The moment for that transition has arrived; the victims of Cyclone Sidr face worsening deprivation and discontent if reconstruction efforts by the Government of Bangladesh and its local and international partners do not move forward with alacrity. END COMMENT.
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